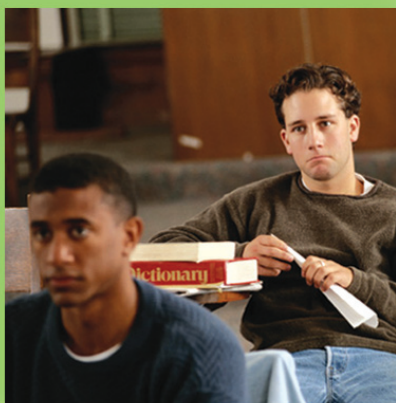


Principles & Standards



2007

revised edition



for quality charter school authorizing



nacsa
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS

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Dear Colleague:

Thousands of public charter schools are providing an excellent education to more than one million U.S. students. Parents, teachers and school leaders now have a direct say in the quality of their schools. This involvement, along with autonomy and high expectations for charter school performance, has resulted in improved academic outcomes for many students.

Charter school authorizers play a vital role in creating and supporting a strong supply of quality charter schools. Whether state or local boards of education, universities or colleges, special-purpose boards, municipal bodies or nonprofits – authorizers guide the school development process, keep the focus on results, and uphold the public trust.

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) is a professional nonprofit organization for authorizers. NACSA provides training, consulting and policy guidance to authorizers and other education leaders interested in increasing the number of quality charter schools, and improving student outcomes. Currently, the majority of U.S. charter schools are overseen by NACSA members.

This guide, *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*, is the professional standard for quality authorizing across America. It has been used to stimulate policy discussions in many state capitols and to inform authorizer practices nationwide.

Our national effort is guided by the growing body of knowledge on quality authorizing and the expertise of authorizers and other leaders within the charter school and education accountability arenas. We thank the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement for supporting this effort and the many skilled individuals who have contributed to this important work.

Consult this resource often as a guide to understanding and fulfilling the critical responsibilities you have accepted as an authorizer. Together we can increase the quality of charter schools by improving the quality of charter school authorizing.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Greg Richmond". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Greg" and last name "Richmond" clearly legible.

Greg Richmond
President

Introduction

Charter school authorizers have learned a great deal during the past decade about what it takes to effectively approve, oversee and support charter schools. To share this expertise and strengthen authorizer practices, the National Association for Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) has adopted *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*. NACSA members represent the leading authorizers across the country and are committed to increasing the number of high quality charter schools.

A quality charter school is characterized by high student achievement, watchful financial stewardship, and responsible governance. Nationally, the demand for such quality charter schools far exceeds the supply. As more charter schools are created to meet the demand for educational choices, authorizers will have the responsibility to hold these autonomous schools accountable for high performance.

These *Principles & Standards* will help to guide authorizers and policy makers to meet that challenge. If we stick to what we know works, chartering will be seen in all communities as a way to launch and sustain schools committed to partnerships among students, teachers, parents and the community.

The interplay of **choice** for families, **autonomy** for educators and **accountability** for results is what matters. *Principles & Standards* helps practitioners get that balance right and fulfill their charge to insure that their charters consistently raise student achievement and sustain those gains. By doing so, America's authorizers will remain at the cutting edge of education policy, creating new ways to inspire performance, manage toward excellence, and spur creativity and hope.

NACSA is committed to increasing the number of quality charter schools. A quality charter school is characterized by high student achievement, financial stewardship, and responsible governance.

What are the Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing?

Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing presents the most important lessons learned by experienced authorizers.

The **Principles** articulate a set of beliefs about quality charter school authorizing. The **Standards** identify core authorizer responsibilities and describe how the principles are upheld within each core responsibility. Together, *Principles & Standards* provide a framework to guide authorizers toward effective practices that increase the overall quality of the charter school initiative.

Principles & Standards does not prescribe an exclusive approach to charter school authorizing. Each authorizer operates under a variety of legal, financial and other constraints. Thus *Principles & Standards* focus is on the fundamental outcomes each authorizer must accomplish in order to fulfill their role in creating and upholding high expectations for the schools they charter.



How do the Principles & Standards promote quality charter schools?

The *Principles & Standards* help current authorizers reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their practices and initiate a process of ongoing improvement. For agencies considering authorizing, the *Principles & Standards* serve as a tool for understanding the complexities of chartering and determining how best to prepare their organizations for this work.

NACSA strives to promote quality charter schools and seeks to foster quality authorizing practices as a mechanism for doing so. The *Principles & Standards* help authorizers improve their practices in ways that enhance charter school quality and student performance.

The Principles & Standards are intended to focus on the **ends** that authorizers should be aiming to attain, recognizing that there are many **means** of getting there.

We present the *Principles & Standards* in two parts. A preamble identifies NACSA's Principles for Quality Charter School Authorizing. The preamble is followed by five Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing. The standards identify the core authorizer responsibilities and describe how these responsibilities are carried out in practice so that they uphold the principles.

NOTE: The *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* offers guidance that experience indicates will strengthen authorizer practices. This is intended as an educational resource only and is distributed with the understanding that the National Association of Charter School Authorizers is not engaged in providing legal advice nor rendering legal or other professional services by its distribution. Charter school authorizers are encouraged to freely and voluntarily associate themselves with the *Principles & Standards* contained herein to the extent that they independently determine such guidance to be consistent with the laws and regulations applicable to their jurisdiction.

Preamble

Charter school authorizers play a new governance role in public education. They grant performance contracts for charter schools that offer autonomy in exchange for accountability. This new relationship gives those closest to the educational process substantial authority over decisions that are essential to making schools perform well.

In return for operational autonomy, charter schools promise to be accountable to high academic and organizational performance. Parents and students hold charter schools accountable by their choices in deciding whether to enroll or continue attending a school. Authorizers insure school-wide and public accountability by measuring a charter school's results against the terms of the performance contract.

The responsibilities of a charter school authorizer are challenging. Authorizers guide and mentor schools in their development, but must also hold them to the high quality standards outlined in their contracts. While being strong advocates for the charter school concept, they must consistently demand outstanding performance from individual schools.

The scope of the authorizer's responsibilities and the availability of resources to support this work vary widely from state to state. Despite the complexities of implementation and variations among jurisdictions, the ultimate mandate is straightforward—authorizers must hold their charter schools accountable for the performance they committed to provide.

With educational excellence and accountability the ultimate goals, authorizers play a critical role in fulfilling the promise of charter schools for enriching and rethinking public education. Therefore, NACSA adopts the following *Principles & Standards* for promoting the establishment and operation of quality charter schools through responsible oversight in the public interest.

Principles for Quality Charter School Authorizing

The purpose of charter school authorizing is to improve student achievement. A quality authorizer engages in responsible oversight of charter schools by ensuring that schools have both the autonomy to which they are entitled and the public accountability for which they are responsible.

In furtherance of this end, quality authorizers should:

- approach authorizing deliberately and thoughtfully with the intent to improve the quality of public school options;
- support and advance the purposes of charter school law;
- be a catalyst for charter school development to satisfy unmet educational needs;
- strive for clarity, consistency, and transparency in developing and implementing authorizing policies and procedures;
- be a source of accurate, intelligible, performance-based information about the schools that they oversee;
- be responsible not for the success or failure of individual schools, but for holding schools accountable for their performance;
- use objective and verifiable measures of student achievement as the primary measure of school quality;
- support parents and students in making decisions and staying informed about the quality of education provided in charter schools; and,
- make the well-being of students the fundamental value informing all decision-making and actions.

The **Principles for Quality Charter School Authorizing** provide the foundation for the following **Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing** that link belief to practice.

Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing

Agency Capacity and Infrastructure

A **quality authorizer** creates organizational structures and commits human and financial resources necessary for conducting its authorizing duties effectively and efficiently.

A quality authorizer:	
Organizational Structures	Implements plans, policies, and processes that streamline and systematize its work. Defines external relationships and lines of authority to protect its authorizing functions from conflicts of interest and political influence.
Human Resources	Enlists competent leadership and required content knowledge through staff, contractual relationships, and/or intra- or interagency collaborations.
Financial Resources	Determines the financial needs of the office and secures sufficient financial resources to adequately fulfill its authorizing responsibilities. Deploys funds effectively and efficiently.

Application Process

A **quality authorizer** implements a comprehensive application process that follows fair procedures and rigorous criteria and grants charters only to those developers who demonstrate strong capacity for establishing and operating a quality charter school.

A quality authorizer:	
Fair Procedures	<p>Communicates chartering opportunities, processes, and decisions openly to the public.</p> <p>Establishes a submission process with realistic and clear time-lines, requirements, and expectations for content and format.</p> <p>Explains how each stage of the application process will be evaluated.</p> <p>Defines clearly how the requirements of the application are met.</p>
Rigorous Criteria	<p>Requires the applicant to provide a clear and compelling mission, a quality educational program, a solid business plan, effective governance and management structures, and evidence of the applicant’s capacity to carry out its plan.</p> <p>Is open to considering innovative educational philosophies and approaches.</p>
Charter Decisions	<p>Conducts a thorough evaluation of the applications using reviewers with educational, organizational, legal, and financial expertise.</p> <p>Documents the factors that determined its decision about each application.</p> <p>Grants charters only to applicants that have met the established criteria.</p> <p>Provides prompt notification of decisions and informs applicants of their rights and responsibilities.</p>

Performance Contracting

A quality authorizer negotiates contracts with charter schools that clearly articulate the rights and responsibilities of each party regarding school autonomy, expected outcomes, measures for evaluating success or failure, performance consequences and other material terms.

A quality authorizer:	
Negotiation	Utilizes a collaborative process to ensure mutual agreement over the terms of the contract.
Rights and Responsibilities	<p>Executes contracts that:</p> <p>Autonomy – Define the school’s rights, including those related to the educational program, control of funds, school management decisions, and waivers from traditional public school laws and regulations.</p> <p>Expected Outcomes – Define clear, measurable, and attainable student achievement and organizational performance goals against which the authorizer will evaluate the school on an ongoing basis and for renewal.</p> <p>Articulates rigorous performance indicators and standards relative to each of the stated goals.</p> <p>Evaluation Process – Stipulate the process for evaluation, including but not limited to: the types of academic, organizational, financial, and compliance data that will be reviewed, and the process and frequency for gathering and reporting such data.</p> <p>Performance Consequences – Explain the conditions under which the authorizer may intervene in the school’s operation or revoke the contract as well as procedures/protocols by which such interventions may occur.</p> <p>Define the criteria for renewal.</p> <p>Other Material Terms – Include the statutory, regulatory, and procedural terms and conditions of operation.</p>

Ongoing Oversight and Evaluation

A quality authorizer conducts contract oversight that evaluates performance, monitors compliance, informs intervention and renewal decisions, and ensures autonomy provided under applicable law.

A quality authorizer:	
Performance Evaluation	Implements an accountability system that generates all the information needed to determine whether a school is meeting the goals and standards articulated in its contract.
Monitors Compliance	Monitors compliance requirements, including those legally mandated and those that are essential to fulfilling the authorizer’s public oversight responsibility. Articulates the consequences for failing to meet compliance requirements. Ensures that schools fulfill their legal obligations to students and parents.
Intervention	Provides clear, adequate, and evidence-based notice of problems. Allows reasonable time for remediation. Makes decisions about whether and how to intervene on a clear and consistent basis.
Autonomy	Respects the school’s authority over its day-to-day operations.

Renewal Decisionmaking

A quality authorizer designs and implements a transparent and rigorous process that uses comprehensive data to make merit-based renewal decisions.

A quality authorizer:	
Transparent Process	<p>Articulates the criteria for renewal.</p> <p>Publishes a timetable and process for renewal decisionmaking.</p> <p>Clearly communicates the options and consequences available under state law including revocation, non-renewal, renewal with conditions, and renewal.</p> <p>Explains any available rights of appeal, whether to administrative or legal bodies, through which the decisions of the authorizer can be challenged.</p>
Comprehensive Data	<p>Analyzes and weighs data regarding a school's performance over time in relation to the goals and terms of its contract.</p> <p>Considers multiple sources of data, including state-mandated, standardized and internal test data, student academic growth over time, evidence of mission-related outcomes, and qualitative reviews, to judge school quality.</p> <p>Solicits parent and public input into the charter renewal process and articulates how community input will affect the decision.</p>
Merit-Based Decisions	<p>Grants renewal only to a school with a quality educational program that has achieved the goals and standards identified in its contract, is organizationally and financially viable, and has been faithful to the terms of its contract and applicable law.</p> <p>Outlines a protocol for the orderly closure of a school.</p>

Adherence to these *Principles & Standards* will guide authorizer practices to ensure that authorizers honor the autonomy of charter schools and hold charter schools accountable for high student achievement.

Who Can Authorize Charter Schools?

The growing trend is for states to allow multiple types of authorizers.

State	Year Law Passed	Authorizers	State	Year Law Passed	Authorizers
Alaska	1995	LEA	Mississippi	1997	SEA
Arizona	1994	LEA, ICB, SEA	Missouri	1998	LEA, SEA, HEI
Arkansas	1995	SEA	Nevada	1997	LEA, SEA
California	1992	LEA, RIA, SEA	New Hampshire	1995	LEA, SEA
Colorado	1993	LEA, ICB	New Jersey	1996	SEA
Connecticut	1996	LEA, SEA	New Mexico	1993	LEA, SEA
Delaware	1995	LEA, SEA	New York	1998	LEA, SEA, HEI
DC	1996	LEA, ICB	North Carolina	1996	SEA, LEA, HEI
Florida	1996	LEA, ICB	Ohio	1997	LEA, RIA, HEI, NFP
Georgia	1996	LEA	Oklahoma	1999	LEA
Hawaii	1994	SEA	Oregon	1997	LEA, SEA
Idaho	1998	LEA, ICB	Pennsylvania	1995	LEA, SEA
Illinois	1996	LEA	Rhode Island	1995	SEA
Indiana	2001	LEA, HEI, MUN	South Carolina	1996	LEA, ICB
Iowa	2002	LEA	Tennessee	2002	LEA
Kansas	1994	LEA	Texas	1995	LEA, SEA, HEI
Louisiana	1995	LEA, SEA	Utah	1998	LEA, ICB
Maryland	2003	LEA, SEA	Virginia	1998	LEA
Massachusetts	1993	SEA	Wisconsin	1993	LEA, HEI, MUN
Michigan	1993	LEA, RIA, HEI	Wyoming	1995	LEA
Minnesota	1991	LEA, RIA, SEA, HEI, NFP			

KEY

LEA	Local Education Agency
RIA	Regional/Intermediate Agency
SEA	State Education Agency

ICB	Independent Chartering Board
HEI	Higher Education Institution
MUN	Municipal Office
NFP	Not-For-Profit Organization

The above table is intended to give a snapshot, using broad categories, of the types of entities with the authority to approve and oversee charter schools in a given state. Individual state laws may contain provisions that restrict the authority of certain chartering entities. Furthermore, state laws are subject to amendments that may affect the validity of this information in the future. Please consult a given state's charter school law for more detailed information.

NACSA's members first ratified the
Principles & Standards for Quality Charter
School Authorizing on May 14, 2004.

Want to know more?

Visit our redesigned web site with more content and the latest NACSA and charter school news and information:

www.qualitycharters.org



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